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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to begin a conversation about and suggest some principles for building more inclusive campus communities. The author explains what class culture is, how classism is embedded in everyday practices and why it is important to consider the way class shapes students, faculty, and staff, and in particular the working class. The paper concludes with a discussion of the role of student affairs professionals in improving the educational experience of working-class students. (Contains 14 references.) (GCP)

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Class Matters

Beyond Access to Inclusion

By Susan E. Borrego

"...nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class difference than in educational settings."

bell hooks (1994, p. 177)

This paper intends to begin a conversation about and suggest some principles for building more inclusive campus communities. I will explain what class culture is, how classism is embedded in everyday practices and why it is important to consider the way class shapes students, faculty, and staff, and in particular the working-class.

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SOCIAL CLASS: UNEXAMINED AND INVISIBLE

For years the implications of social class identity have been ignored in higher education in general and student affairs in particular. Even in the context of diversity, the ways in which class shapes one's identity remain largely unexamined. As hard as class is to define and as volatile as conversations may be, the emerging voices of working-class faculty, staff, and students provide a very important contribution to support an expanded notion of diversity on our campuses. Many major national educational organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), as well as a majority of colleges and universities claim that diversity is central to the educational mission of the academy. Additionally researchers have begun to examine the intersection of multiple identities and the impact of those complex intersections on the lives of individuals (Rothenberg, 2001). In spite of this increased attention to diversity and the evolution in our understanding of diversity issues, the consideration of class culture remains largely outside this national discourse, the diversity literature, and academic institutions.

Many Americans believe we live in a classless society, and class is invisible in both the public and educational discourse, (hooks, 2000; Zweig, 2000). Class appears to be invisible in conference presentations and books devoted to the topic of diversity. Even though class is regularly included as an identifier in multicultural clusters (race, class, gender), it disappears as the discussion proceeds, subsumed by other identities (Linkon, 1999).

BROADENING BEYOND STUDENTS: WORKING-CLASS ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY

In the past decade increasing numbers of working-class students have come to college. Additionally, there are growing numbers of faculty and administrators with working-class backgrounds working at colleges and universities. Their stories, surfacing through narratives such as the early classic *Strangers in Paradise* (Ryan & Sackrey, 1996), *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (Dews & Law, 1995), *Working-Class Women in the Academy* (Torkarczyk & Fay, 1993), and most recently, *Teaching Working-Class* (Linkon, 1999), describe feelings of ambivalence and experiences of difference and marginalization. The shared accounts weave common threads of not having the right clothes, language, or experience. They describe not coming from the right high schools and not understanding the college world and implicit social rules. Working-class people who enter into the university environment are often unaware that rules can always be negotiated if you know the right people or process. Working-class people find themselves metaphorically and actually waiting in line as their classmates pass them by with the knowledge that the rules were merely technicalities. However, in spite of acknowledging intersectional identities including class, the academy remains silent about class culture and its embedded middle/upper-class norms. Because of this silence, working-class people only slowly come to understand that the differences they feel are related to their class origins.

There is no single working-class identity because there are exceptions to every definition. However the basic circumstances—lack of power, limited cultural capital, economic vulnerability, and a low level of education—form the groundwork of working-class culture.

Working-class students, faculty, and administrators, particularly those who attend private institutions or colleges with large numbers of traditionally aged students, describe realizing at some point that their lives are very different from the lives of their middle to upper class peers. Many working-class students and staff recount becoming painfully aware of all the large and small ways in which they were made to feel they did not measure up. Faculty and administrators tell of cocktail parties where they were underdressed, did not know how to make small talk, asked for a beer instead of wine, and were criticized by peers for direct language and/or expressive mannerisms. All describe feeling invisible and realizing that their life experiences and ways of knowing and working simply were not represented or valued in the knowledge and practice of their college or university.

As these stories were told, something else began to happen as well. As working-class people shared the ways in which they had felt embarrassed and/or out of their league, they realized they were not alone in their experiences. In spite of arguments by some economists that class background does not influence perspectives, a picture of shared values, perspectives, cultural beliefs, and mores—a shared culture—began to emerge. Descriptions such as Ira Shor's (1987) are common, portraying working-class students as hard-working and fair-minded, combining a resistance to authority, a desire for and belief in respect, a sometimes sentimental belief in social harmony and justice, and a lack of arrogance. Working-class

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people, many who described trying to leave their pre-college world behind, began to reclaim their heritage. Without romanticizing their class backgrounds they began to recognize the important ways they had been shaped by strong family ties, commitments to neighborhoods, a strong work ethic, and a respect for education.

WHAT IS CLASS CULTURE?

Defining class culture remains problematic. Sociologists and economists disagree about the definition, and offer contradictory opinions as to whether class cultural considerations are relevant and in fact, even whether or not class matters in modern American society. Traditional class based scholarship in fields such as sociology, labor studies, and economics has been primarily concerned with individuals' relationship to the means of production or with stratification theories but has seldom explored the lived experience of individuals or, more specifically, their experiences in higher education. Nor have the fundamental assumptions behind organizational structures been challenged. One sociologist explained to me that she had been working with class issues for twenty years but had not explored the ways in which class heritage shaped individuals' lives. Apparently, we lack ways to discuss how class shapes life chances, perspectives, and understandings of class itself.

The quest to understand how one has been shaped by access to cultural capital is not meant to justify capitalism or to minimize the ways in which other identities (i.e. race, gender, etc.) impact one's status. Without idealizing working-class life, the intent is to illuminate the lives and experiences of working-class individuals in order to develop environments that are more sensitive to class difference.

Janet Zandy describes class as an "aspect of shared economic circumstances and shared social and cultural practices in relation to positions of power . . . [Class] shapes our lives and intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, and geography in profound ways" (1996, p. 8). Examining the social construct of class and the way in which it shapes individuals' lives makes it more important to clarify the issues than to settle on one all-inclusive definition.

Class shapes and locates an individual in society. There are personal, social, and political consequences determined by that location including differences in opportunities, expectations, and treatment. In the US class status has been accepted (often unconsciously) as a given—natural and inevitable. Categorizing an individual as working-class or underclass carries stereotypes and assumptions about innate ability and moral character. Rather than seeing the distinctions between rich and poor as a result of ways of structuring the economy, Americans often perceive them as the result of innate differences among people. Poor or working-class individuals are seen as personal failures or unmotivated to succeed rather than as individuals whose lives have been shaped by their relationship to the economic system.

There is no single working-class identity because there are exceptions to every definition. However the basic circumstances—lack of power, limited cultural capital, economic vulnerability, and a low level of education—form the groundwork of working-class culture. Many other factors such as geography and difference in race, gender, sexuality, age, and ability intersect with class. Whether the geography is rural, agricultural, industrial, immigrant, or urban, it impacts the meaning of "working-class" (Linkon, 1999).

Culture incorporates aspects of shared experience, attitudes, language, values, mores, et cetera. Class culture influences an individual's basic assumptions, how one is taught to behave, expectations of self and others, one's options, concept of future, approaches to problem solving, and beliefs. For the purpose of this paper, "working-class" refers to those individuals whose parents' educational level was high school or less, whose parents performed manual (blue-collar) labor, and who were low-income during childhood. For all the difficulty of definition, and invisibility in the academy, the literature presents numerous examples of distinct characteristics of working-class life that shape working-class people.

EXPANDING THE CONVERSATION: DIVERSITY AND CLASS CULTURE

Educators are increasingly recognizing diversity and its centrality to the educational mission of the academy. *To Form a More Perfect Union* (Musil, Garcia, Hudgins, Nettles, Sedlacek, and Smith, 1999), published by AAC&U, expresses the sense of numerous organizations and individuals that diversity matters. In higher education we have begun to recognize the ways in which research based on small homogeneous groups limits the effectiveness of particular programs. Additionally, there is a growing body of research that demonstrates that the educational experience of non-traditional groups is negatively impacted by the ways in which their experiences are invisible in theoretical and programmatic frames. While it would be disingenuous to suggest that cultural equality prevails at institutions, headway has been made by the wider inclusion of other historically marginalized groups. Conceptual frameworks and methods have been challenged by different voices with different perspectives, creating new questions, methods, and practices. For administrators it is this kind of challenge that informs policy and practice changes. This history provides the impetus to include class culture in academic and co-curricular programs.

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The danger of focusing on class is that programs and research will be perceived as a one dimensional exploration of class at the expense of other identities. On the other hand, in the context of multiculturalism and diversity programs it is crucial that we stop ignoring class difference. It is necessary to explore the issues of class as an aspect of difference in order more effectively to understand how our perceptions, expectations, and institutional and personal practices are shaped by embedded assumptions about class, as well as recognize that class is interwoven with all other forms of difference. Exploring class bias will assist us in a better understanding of ourselves, others, and the ways in which we have been privileged. Understanding class is a precondition for more effective multiculturalism (Davis, 1996).

My own situation provides a typical example of the difficulties of discussing class. As a first generation working-class college student from outside Detroit, quite by accident I attended a Christian, liberal arts college in Idaho. I had no idea what I was doing. My high school counselors had not targeted me for college and no one in my family thought I should go to college. The college contacted me, walked me through the process, and I made my first plane trip to Idaho. As a sophomore I remember sitting in a lecture listening to a white sociologist describe characteristics of black, urban families that closely mirrored my own family experiences. Summoning my courage, I raised my hand and asked if the characteristics were racial or urban. Since I had learned not to ask questions in this environment, it was a huge risk. I was humiliated as she reacted to what she perceived as my attempt to identify with black oppression. She chastised that as a white person I should never compare myself to the circumstances of a person of color because no matter how poor I may be I could always "pass." It would be seventeen years before I understood that my intuition in that classroom was about class. It would have been much more helpful and a significantly better learning experience if she had instead explained both that I benefited from white privilege and that there probably were some class similarities between black and white urban families. Rather than polarizing issues around a single identity or ranking marginalizations, an understanding of multiple identities allows one to understand more complex notions of privilege and to work at the intersections of difference more effectively.

Working-class students (as well as a host of other academic immigrants) have to overcome the sense that they should not be in the academy before they can begin to act as agents in their own academic experience. Sherry Linkon (1999) argues that an

> impetus for considering class culture is to provide a space for working-class people to make sense of their experience, to learn to negotiate the contradictory nature of their working-class life and the relative privilege of the academy, and to find ways to maintain their class culture and not become assimilated as they attempt to work in the academy—to find a way to resist the denial of working-class identity and consciousness . . . to use working-class knowledge to produce culture and to claim a place as a public intellectual. (p. 7)

Unmasking class assumptions is like peeling layers from an onion. Peeling away these layers will continue to provide opportunity for increasingly diverse perspectives to be included in institutional transformation.

WHY CLASS MATTERS

Many Americans remain uncomfortable talking about social class and its influence on lives in this country. In this "land of milk and honey," the notion of class threatens the ideal of the American dream and the ideology of equal opportunity. Belief that all of us are born free and equal and that we can all enhance achievement with hard work means we seldom sufficiently recognize the power that status and class play in shaping an individual's life and the organizational structures of society. In spite of the fact that many of us can describe class realities there is a great deal of resistance to the idea that class still shapes lives in this millennium, compounded by the difficulty of defining exact categories.

Traditional categories based on income are insufficient determinates. Money is only part of the issue. Class shapes our lives in many ways, intersecting with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and geography. Cultural capital—one's social circles, experiences, and connections—determine access and power. One's perspective is shaped by the distribution of power and status in society (Bourdieu, 1977). Even when working-class people acquire money, they discover that their opportunities as well as their identity has already been shaped by the lack of access and connections that privilege affords.

Working-class academics and students often describe choosing the college they attended based on what was close or inexpensive, perhaps a place where they could work, support family at home, and go to school. The choice of a major was also based on expediency. Consequently one of the themes that emerges for those working-class students who later aspire to become academics is discovering that after all their schooling, they do not in fact have the kind of academic credentials that will best position them for a life in the academy.

As different populations increasingly come to campus, the inherent biases of organizational structures come to light. Efforts to provide access sometimes inadvertently reinforce a notion of disadvantage which in turn stigmatizes the very group of students that programs were designed to assist. Traditional Bridge programs that were designed to assist with preparation

and transition can have this effect, reinforcing embedded assumptions about individual intelligence rather than lack of opportunity or unfamiliarity with the educational structure. Consequently students are categorized and sometimes tracked in ways that marginalize them. This can be a painful process for the individual classified as "other."

There has been an expectation that non-traditional students need assistance in overcoming "cultural barriers" (London, 1992). However, the idea of overcoming barriers falls short of embracing aspects of working-class culture that students bring with them to the academy or embracing ways for working-class students to value their culture. In addition, the focus on overcoming barriers does little to reveal the systemic, unacknowledged middle/upper-class values that structure the academy. As in research on other under-represented groups, much of the current literature on working-class students focuses on finding ways to help students adjust to and prepare for college life. The research to date has been very service oriented rather than exploring the enrichment these students (and I would add, faculty and staff) bring to campus communities. This attitude reveals the class bias of those who conceive and carry out the research.

As the diversity research has evolved we have learned that increasing the numbers of particular groups on campus is a first step, but increased numbers does not automatically lead to more inclusive environments or increased student learning. Realizing the potential educational benefits associated with diversity takes deliberate efforts on the part of administrators and faculty. Exploring our own assumptions about class and how it shapes the lives of our students will increase our ability to enhance the learning environment. The best chance for campuses to be transformed by increasingly diverse perspectives is lost if we cannot find ways for those perspectives to be recognized and to challenge and change the way we do business.

Many Americans remain uncomfortable talking about social class and its influence on lives in this country. In this "land of milk and honey," the notion of class threatens the ideal of the American dream and the ideology of equal opportunity.

One of the most distressing outcomes of the invisibility of class culture is the missed opportunity of students consciously to develop the skills to negotiate both their home world and the academy and to move back and forth between them. Working-class students and professionals tell numerous stories about remaining closeted about their pre-college lives and communities. Feeling like they cannot go home again and unable to navigate both worlds simultaneously they often retreat from those who love and support them at home. At the same time they describe realizing that they are less than full participants in the academy. Initially uncertain of why that is the case, but feeling a sense that college life is foreign to much of what they know, they become ambivalent about their new community and their place in it. Some leave college and return home rather than risk becoming too different from those they left behind. A critical understanding of class culture among Student Affairs professionals could assist students in developing the consciousness and skills to live in this borderland.

Student Affairs professionals have long been concerned with the development of the whole student. Understanding who students are and what they need—assisting them on their educational journeys—is nothing new. We are uniquely positioned to explore the institutional practices that perpetuate class marginalization and the ways in which classism shapes students' lives, opportunities and experiences.

SHIFTING THE PARADIGM FROM "FIRST-GENERATION" TO "WORKING-CLASS"

Some argue that class culture is addressed in the services and programs developed to assist first-generation students transitioning to college. However, not all first-generation students are working-class students. Shifting the paradigm to focus on what working-class students bring to campus can:

- Open dialogue for examining our assumptions about working-class students.
- Demonstrate the invisibility of working-class students in the curriculum.
- Explore ways in which institutional practices ignore and discount experiences of working-class students.
- Assist students in developing the tools to critically examine their unconscious assumptions about their cultural identities.
- Assist students in understanding structural and organizational classism and developing the skills to make more informed choices about their participation.
- Encourage development of allies and facilitate more inclusive environments.

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As increasing numbers of working-class students come to campus it is important for campus administrators to develop more informed perspectives about students from the working-class. While the conversation about class is difficult, there is plenty of data to support its timeliness.

Research about learning has demonstrated that students who see their experiences and concerns reflected in the curriculum are more engaged. In addition, a decade of diversity research has demonstrated the benefit of diverse perspectives to educational communities. However, Linkon (1999) argues that "the principles of inclusion and recognition that have been so important in creating spaces for gender studies, black studies, queer studies, and ethnic studies in colleges and universities have not generally been extended to class" (p. 2-3). These programs are changing the types of questions that are asked, pedagogical practices, the way research is conducted, and what forms of knowledge are legitimized by academic study.

Although pedagogy and research may not typically be the chief concern of student affairs practitioners, the academic work in this area supports student affairs efforts to address the whole student. Making allies with the faculty involved in working-class issues potentially strengthens our work with students. Making space for class identity and for class heritage has wide ranging implications for individuals' lives and for both curricular and co-curricular programs in institutions committed to multiculturalism. Exploring the embedded classed structural norms can help change policy and programs.

Student Affairs professionals are positioned to provide leadership about the students coming to their colleges. It is incumbent upon Student Affairs professionals, often considered the experts about students, to develop deeper understandings of who students are and what they bring to campus, and in the role of advocate, to champion those aspects of student lives that are rendered invisible by day-to-day practices in the academy. Class identity is an area in which the scholarship and practice of student affairs have largely been silent. Research about working-class students has often focused on their academic deficits. Developing an understanding of the issues and the role that class plays in shaping individuals' perspectives and expectations will lead to more informed analyses of the ways in which these issues are embedded in the everyday discourse and practices of campuses.

Working to become conscious of how class shapes both students' lives and the institution's structures is a starting point. Examining one's own class privilege is also necessary.

It would be beneficial to students for administrators in learning environments to realize that institutional structures most often reflect the values of the dominant culture and class, unconsciously privileging some forms of student experience while marginalizing others. Students from educated families who come to college with cultural capital, professional connections, and travel experience have more opportunities than their working-class peers. Opportunity begets opportunity, and these students transition more quickly to the new opportunities of the new environment. They may travel abroad, participate in faculty research, and get involved in or tapped for leadership opportunities more than their working-class peers. Student Affairs practitioners have the power to influence both research concerning students and the systems that can be so unfriendly and oppressive to underrepresented students. Through our practice we can either recreate the status quo or find ways of including different voices to transform institutional cultures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

It is safe to say that among Student Affairs professionals there is a shared aspiration to facilitating an education that prepares students for a pluralistic democracy, to supporting academic success and developing citizens who can contribute leadership to their society. The history of Student Affairs work is one of considering the student's whole experience and finding ways to maximize student learning. To that end it is important to explore the ways in which students and colleagues from the working-class are making contributions to the academy. Working to become conscious of how class shapes both students' lives and the institution's structures is a starting point. Examining one's own class privilege is also necessary. Student Affairs professionals may take the following approaches to improving the educational experience of working-class students.

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- The historic commitment of Student Affairs to educating the whole student requires that professionals know who their students are, the issues that affect them, and their experiences in college. Developing an understanding of working-class students and their experiences strengthens a professionals' ability to design programs and services to more fully support the student's college experience.
- Institutional responsiveness is demonstrated in myriad ways. Exploring the ways that institutional policies privilege some students and not others is central to the work of Student Affairs professionals. Bringing to consciousness the real differences in opportunity, expectations, and treatment faced by working-class students ultimately benefits many non-traditional students.
- Rendon (1996) identifies the culture between working-class home culture and middle/upper class university culture as "border living." Student affairs professionals working with working-class students might develop programs (to include opportunities for dialogue and other participatory activities) in which students can explore the reality of this "border living" and identify strategies to assist them in moving between both worlds.
- Student Affairs professionals committed to student learning can engage academic colleagues in collaborative efforts to examine the construction of knowledge, pedagogy and the ways in which class issues impact the classroom.
- Class considerations provide a bridge that allows for more effective work across difference. Professionals need to increase their awareness of the enormous toll that classism takes on people, examining who is included and excluded and the ways in which embedded classism impacts the campus community.
- The diversity on campuses provides a rich resource for learning. However, Student Affairs professionals must develop multicultural competencies to facilitate across difference. Exploring class culture creates opportunities for developing broader skills to engage students in learning about difference.
- Many of the programs developed to work with working-class students are not geared toward high achievement but persistence. In order to fully supporting student academic success, we need to know what it takes for students to be successful. Beyond persistence students need more active advising about the nature of higher education opportunities and positioning themselves relative to their chosen career interests.
- Working-class students and academics often choose their community college, college or university based on expediency, such as proximity to home, rather than the academic status as perceived by others. The choice of major may also reflect expediency. With this in mind, student affairs professionals might facilitate conversations that assist students in making more intentional decisions about their degree path.
- Orientation and transition programs (frequently called "Bridge" programs) provide an excellent opportunity to support working-class students. Care must be exercised that these programs provide access rather than reinforcing inferiority. For example focusing on student "deficits" reinforces the students' outsider status. Transition programs that truly assist working-class students include explanations about the different culture of higher education and activities designed to weave their pre-college lives into the transition.
- Money is only part of the issue in defining social class. Social class can also be expressed through the intersection with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and geography. Student affairs professionals knowledgeable about these intersections can assist students in developing an understanding of the way that these socially constructed categories impact their lives.

Our task as Student Affairs educators is to provide leadership to make change happen; we must reframe

> higher education to accommodate border crossers . . . and [use] our privilege as faculty and administrators to provide leadership to make change happen. Our task is to create a new consciousness in the academic borderlands—one that heals, one that connects diverse cultures, languages, realities, and ways of knowing. (Rendon, 1996, p. 20).

Working-class student perspectives offer another lens for viewing the world that is crucial to the development of a learning community. The information that Student Affairs professionals collect about students through campus research and daily interactions with them must influence our practices. Student Affairs professionals have the power to help students tap their unique class position as a source of power.

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